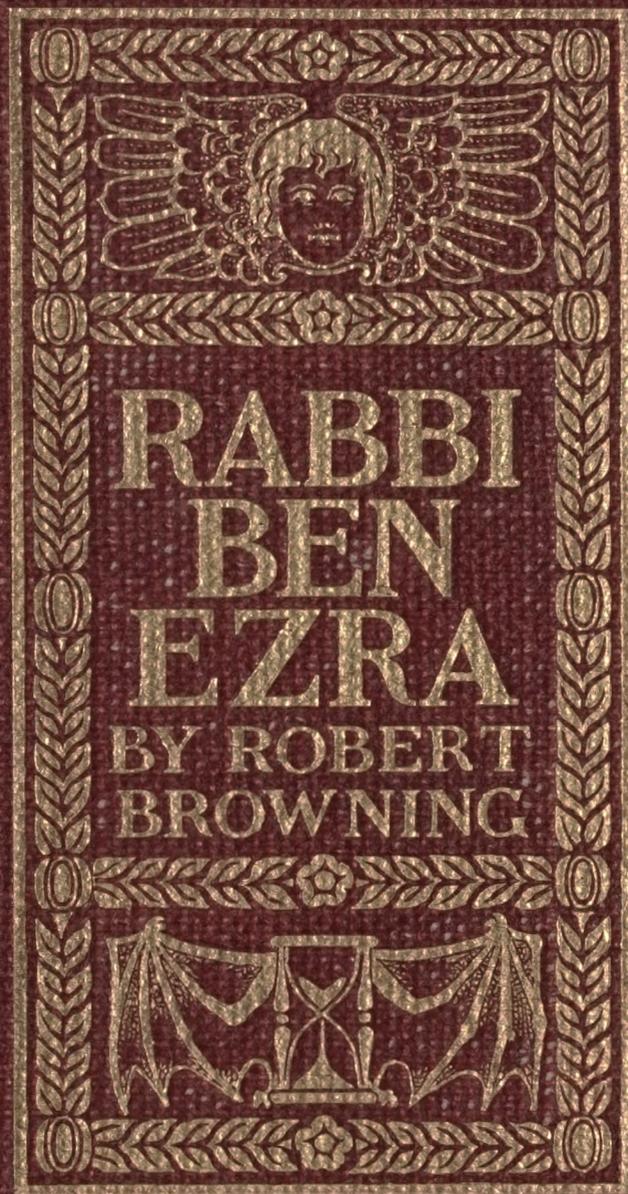


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Harriet J. Brewster







RABBI BEN EZRA



# RABBI BEN EZRA

BY ROBERT BROWNING

WITH SUPPLEMENTARY ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM ADAMS SLADE



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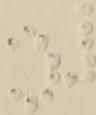
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TO MY MOTHER



INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM ADAMS  
SLADE



## INTRODUCTION

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

**B**ROWNING'S Rabbi Ben Ezra, as a vindication of age, is suggestive of the De Senectute of Cicero. This poem, however, is very much more than an exaltation of the fullness of years; it is also the statement of a philosophy for every age and station in life. And this philosophy, it may well be said, is altogether one of courage and cheer, — qualities always in need with young as well as with old, and so ever to be noted when found, whether in literature or in life. Because of these facts, the observations which follow are made. In a recent volume of essays, the late Professor Everett of Harvard calls Rabbi Ben Ezra "one of the most exalted of the poems of Browning," and "also one of the most exalted in the whole range of literature." Professor James Seth likewise writes of this poem in his Study of Ethical Principles and observes that, "Perhaps one of the completest descriptions of the ethical life, at least in English literature, is that which Browning has given us in his famous Rabbi Ben Ezra." And Mr. F. J. Furnivall, himself now as mellowed with years as the venerable Rabbi, enters this note against the title of the poem, in his bibliography of Browning, "One of the deepest and weightiest of all Browning's works. My favourite one. It contains the Philosophy of Life."

The praise here recorded is not superlative, but rightly stands as the deliberate estimate of sympathetic feeling and sound judgment. The thought contained in these stanzas is

**Rabbi** sublime ; the statement of this thought is striking and as adequate as the statement of thought of such sublimity can well be. Serene, trustful, uplifting, this poem is the expression of a never-yielding, unquestioning faith in the power and goodness of God and in the righteousness of His ways with man. The noble affirmations which the poet gives to us, with the Rabbi as his mouthpiece, are possible only of a religious nature of the truest type. In them the one central thought of the love of God in the life of man is everywhere made manifest, and the principle is developed that since the life of man is not limited by the confines of this world, the struggles it ever knows while here are essential to the growth which works upwards from the animal within us towards the perfection which is our goal.

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!  
Be our joys three-parts pain!  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain ;  
Learn, nor account the pang ; dare, never grudge the throe !

This is the bold and cheering cry of the Rabbi.  
And his triumph over the animal he declares,  
as well as the dread alternative if the contending forces in life's struggle are allowed the victory, when he says

A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale ;  
and, again, when he says :

Therefore I summon age  
To grant youth's heritage,

Life's struggle having so far reached its term :  
Thence shall I pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute ; a God though in the germ.

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From such a spiritual height, this splendid servant of God gives expression to a confidence in the Divine wisdom which makes gain of loss, faith of doubt, and success of failure, and which, in so doing, finds all things good, all life worthy, and age its glorious crown. So, in the repose and stillness of the twilight hour of age, the pious Rabbi invites us to a survey of life with him. Bidding us to trust in God, see all, and never fear, he begins with a consideration of youth. He has no remonstrance for its indecision and ambitions, or for the hopes and anxieties annulling its best years. Rather he prizes our very doubt, and shows us that in the spark that disturbs us, we are to discover our elevation above the brute kingdom and our alliance with our Creator. It then behooves us to strive and learn and dare, never heeding the world's rebuffs or the stings and pain of defeat. We must never regard failure, except as a means of attaining success, but ever march onwards in entire submission to the Divine will, resting content in the assurance that all is for the best. Progress comes through defeat, and the disappointments of youth enrich the heritage of age. We shall know, being old, and have knowledge absolute, and the peace which comes with knowledge. And because of the permanence of that which is good, God will find value even in our immature instincts and unsure purposes.

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Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies that broke through language and escaped ;  
All I could never be,  
All, men ignored in me,  
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Our end as vessels is explained by the Rabbi in glowing figure to be to slake God's thirst, and he ends his discourse with a renewed declaration of confidence in the Divine wisdom and with the earnest prayer:

So, take and use Thy work :  
Amend what flaws may lurk,  
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim !  
My times be in Thy hand !  
Perfect the cup as planned !  
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same !

Characterized by such spirituality, Rabbi Ben Ezra responds to the most ardent longings of the soul, and by its buoyant cheerful optimism, its vigorous tone, its eloquent statement of belief and fullest assurance, gives a significance to life which, to the believing mind, answers the question of the ages. The abiding faith in God, the confidence in the righteousness of His dealings with man throughout this life, and the belief in a higher, better life to come as shown in the utterances of the Rabbi, thus make these stanzas much more than a description of the ethical life, truly as Professor Seth has stated it to be contained in them, and cause them to exhibit a religious faith of the loftiest and noblest kind. And this faith, it may be observed, while entirely consonant with such a religious belief as we should expect a Jewish Rabbi like

Ben Ezra to hold, is very closely related to Christianity; for, with a foundation completely laid in God's love, it is enabled to perceive the means of progress in adversity itself, when prosperity might be a stumbling-block in the way. But "Prosperity," remembering the words of Bacon, "is the blessing of the Old Testament, adversity is the blessing of the New, which carrieth the greater benediction, and the clearer revelation of God's favour." Furthermore while the Old Testament teaches righteousness, the New Testament by direct precept teaches righteousness through union with the Divine will. "His will is our peace" is the secret made known to Dante in Paradise, and such submission to the will of God as was there made known to the poet, is taught in the New Testament and is taught in Rabbi Ben Ezra. It is unnecessary, however, to dwell on the Christian sentiment of this poem. As a whole it is naturally and appropriately to be taken as an expression of thought by a Jewish Rabbi and so as a statement of pure theism.

Rabbi Ben Ezra is not, however, an argumentative poem, like Browning's *La Saisiaz*, for example, and employs no close or analytical reasoning. It is intuitional in its view, and is inspired by such spiritual insight or "genius" as Browning writes of in a letter dealing with this very poem. It is such spiritual insight that he ascribes in this letter to Napoleon when he said of Christ "Do you know that I am an understander of men? Well, He was no man!" and also to Charles Lamb, who, when asked how

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he and some friends would feel if Christ entered the room in which they were, replied, "You see — if Shakespeare entered, we should all rise; if He appeared, we must kneel"; and also to Dante, when he said, "Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another better, there, where that lady lives, of whom my soul was enamoured." This inspiration of the shrewd, keen-witted Napoleon, of the gentle Lamb, and of the steadfast Dante is likewise that of Browning. In the letter mentioned, he confesses to it; in Rabbi Ben Ezra he speaks with it. He does not stop to prove, for he knows.

Such a reassuring voice was sadly needed at the time when this poem first appeared. The scientific spirit was then dominant, doubt was strong, and the wave of new thought seemed about to carry away the very foundation of the old order of things. So Matthew Arnold, whose restless, questioning mind was as the spirit of the age itself, sighed to his companion in Dover Beach:

The sea of faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

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Despondency such as this is utterly foreign to the stout heart and robust mind of Robert Browning. Courage and cheer were his watch-words, for hope with him was ever bright and faith never failing. So he could sing in notes which fully chord with those of Rabbi Ben Ezra:

I find earth not gray but rosy,  
Heaven not grim but fair of hue.  
Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.  
Do I stand and stare? All's blue.

This optimism is more than a protest against the doubt and despondency of Browning's day. It is a protest likewise against that doubt and despondency of all time which is so well illustrated in many of the quatrains of Fitzgerald's rendering of Omar Khayyám. These Rubáiyát of marvellous beauty were first issued in their English dress but a few years before Rabbi Ben Ezra was published in *Dramatis Personæ*, and while the latter may be regarded as a comparatively neglected poem, Omar, as Mr. Andrew Lang has said, "is chatted about, written about, translated, illustrated, dined over, poetized about, to an extent which would scarcely be excessive if Omar were Homer." The cause of Omar's popularity is not far to seek. His is the record of a soul dealing with the ever-burning questions of Why and Whence and Whither, and whatever observations he has to offer are

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strikingly made and with bewildering luxury of metaphor. As poetry, the Rubáiyát are to be admired; as the history of a soul in the search of truth, they are to be respected; as a statement of sound thought, they are to be condemned, for Omar's general view is that of an epicurean philosopher who preaches a creed outworn in the progress of both philosophic and scientific investigation.

In his Rubáiyát, as we have them given to us by Fitzgerald, one plunges deep into the mysteries of things, and here where the nightingale sings, wine sparkles, and roses exhale their fragrance, the anxious seeker for the eternal realities is told that his pursuit is vain and that the logic absolute he desires is to be found in the fruitful grape. Happiness then is the end of life, and we are bidden:

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend;  
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,  
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and – sans End!

From this, it results that the endeavor to make the most of our time here in the pursuit of happiness must become strenuous; for, according to Omar, our time is short and but,

A Moment's Halt – a momentary taste  
Of BEING from the Well amid the Waste –  
And Lo! – the phantom Caravan has reach'd  
The NOTHING it set out from – Oh, make haste!

So brief is life, but long enough for our shadowy existences to secure a "taste of Being" before passing into the Nothing which is our destiny. Surely the waters of Marah could not be more

bitter than those of the "Well amid the Waste" if, in good faith, the pessimistic Omar is made the guide to it. Even his conception of God offers no hope; for we are

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But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays  
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;  
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

Freedom, moral obligation, God's love, immortality, all these would Omar, in his darkest moods, wrest from mankind. In their place no positive system is erected, nor any solution of life's mysteries attempted through the vision of faith when knowledge is dim; but only the cheerless message of "a short life and a merry one," so "let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die." This, with Omar, is all of life we know and all it is possible for us to know; and such is the chilling, depressing lesson he teaches. In striking opposition to this hopelessness is the exalted faith of Rabbi Ben Ezra. Calm and abiding where Omar is querulous and inconstant, confident where Omar doubts, rational where Omar is sensual, and with regard for both body and soul where Omar degenerates into epicureanism pure and simple, this poem is in significant contrast with the *Rubáiyát* at many points, while in brief it may be said that the former contains a positive affirmation for almost every scepticism of the Persian poet. Happiness is not the end of life, as Omar would have it, and the Rabbi exclaims:

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Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed  
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast :  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men ;  
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-  
crammed beast?

Far removed from feasting, the life, indeed, is more than meat. It has a genuine purpose, and that purpose the Rabbi declares is God's service, in which we make toward the perfection He has planned. Consequently the Rabbi holds that we are not to live as though life were short and that were all, but with eternity in view, for which all our experiences here will be of lasting value:

And I shall thereupon  
Take rest, ere I be gone  
Once more on my adventure brave and new :  
Fearless and unperplexed,  
When I wage battle next,  
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

Beside this glowing faith of the Rabbi, the gloomy destiny Omar pictures for us as dust returned to dust

and under Dust to lie,  
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and – sans End!

becomes gloomier still.

The Rabbi, too, regards us as dust, but in striking metaphor represents us as clay being molded by God, the Potter, on time's wheel into the perfect vessels which are to be used to satisfy His thirst in the Heaven which He has prepared and in which our consummation is to be attained. In this lofty conception we have

perhaps the finest use of the figure of the potter's wheel in literature. Through its symbolism, the Rabbi regards God and the Soul as the two eternal realities :

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All that is, at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall ;  
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure :  
What entered into thee,  
That was, is, and shall be :  
Time's wheel runs back or stops : Potter and clay endure.

Omar also uses the same metaphor, but how differently may be seen from the following quatrains :

Then to the Lip of this poor earthen Urn  
I lean'd, the Secret of my Life to learn :  
And Lip to Lip it murmur'd — "While you live,  
"Drink ! — for, once dead, you never shall return."

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive  
Articulation answer'd, once did live,  
And drink ; and Ah ! the passive Lip I kiss'd,  
How many Kisses might it take — and give !

For I remember stopping by the way  
To watch a Potter thumping his wet Clay :  
And with its all-obliterated Tongue  
It murmur'd — "Gently, Brother, gently, pray !"

And has not such a Story from of Old  
Down Man's successive generations roll'd  
Of such a clod of saturated Earth  
Cast by the Maker into Human mould ?

And not a drop that from our Cups we throw  
For Earth to drink of, but may steal below  
To quench the fire of Anguish in some Eye  
There hidden — far beneath, and long ago.

In this fantasy the vessel, whether man or the drinking cup, is represented as sentient, and so

**Rabbi Ben Ezra** is the clay that was man but which, now hidden far beneath the earth's surface and resolved into its native dust, still cries for the joys of the life it once knew. Such thought as this calls for an expression of the opposite view, and it would almost seem as though Rabbi Ben Ezra had been written with Omar in mind; but this theory is hardly tenable, as has been pointed out in a recent volume on Browning. The important fact is that Rabbi Ben Ezra is an expression of the faith of the ages, the Rubáiyát of the doubt. It is an interesting coincidence that the speaker in this monologue of Browning was contemporaneous with the Persian tent-maker whom Fitzgerald, Browning's own contemporary, has made so widely known. Abraham ben Meir ben Ezra, for such is the full name of the lay-figure Browning uses, or Ibn Ezra, to give him the name by which he is better known, was, like Omar, a poet and astronomer. He was also accomplished in other directions and deeply erudite. He was born in Toledo, in Spain, about 1088, but left that city in his young manhood, after failing to win any degree of appreciation there, and started on a wide course of travel. It is recorded that he visited Rome, Lucca, Mantua, Verona, Rhodes, England, and France, and that he also journeyed to Egypt and perhaps to other parts of Africa. In his latter days he returned to Rome and died there in 1167. Everywhere in his travels Ibn Ezra carried with him learning and eloquence. He became distinguished not only as an astronomer and poet, but also as an astrologer, physician, and

philosopher, and more especially as a grammarian and commentator. He is said to have been the first to establish biblical exegesis on scientific principles, and he has been called the father of the higher criticism. He has also been named the first to doubt the unity of the Book of Isaiah, though he never doubted that the Bible was inspired and contained the word of God throughout.

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The word of God as he understood it so ruled Ibn Ezra's life that he became even more noted for his piety than for his scholarship. Writing of the laws of Moses, he said: "All the precepts are to be referred to three things, (1) to piety of the heart, (2) to words, (3) to deeds. And as unity is contained in every number, so the beginning of every pious act by deed or word is internal piety, without which all worship is false and of none avail." In another place he wrote: "But I have found a verse which includes all the precepts, 'Fear the Lord your God and serve Him.'" Ibn Ezra's life was indeed one of service, and it was marked by a singular uprightness which must have been the fruit of the internal piety of which he wrote. That he needed all the consolation that religion could afford is evident from his life. His path was not a smooth one, but frequently rough and hard. Fortune treated him so perversely that he is said to have declared in grim humor, "I strive to become wealthy, but the stars are opposed to me. If I were to engage in shroud-making, men would cease dying; or if I made candles, the sun would never set unto the hour of my death."

**Rabbi** Despite the buffetings of time and circum-  
**Ben** stance, Ibn Ezra maintained an abiding trust  
**Ezra** in God. His sense of dependence on a Supreme  
Being is well shown in one of his poems which  
has been translated by Alice Lucas under the  
title of Resignation and printed in the collec-  
tion called *The Jewish Year*:

I hope for the salvation of the Lord,  
In Him I trust, when fears my being thrill,  
Come life, come death, according to His word,  
He is my portion still.

Hence doubting heart! I will the Lord extol  
With gladness, for in Him is my desire,  
Which, as with fatness, satisfies my soul,  
That doth to heaven aspire.

All that is hidden, shall mine eyes behold,  
And the great Lord of all be known to me,  
Him will I serve, His am I as of old;  
I ask not to be free.

Sweet is ev'n sorrow coming in His name,  
Nor will I seek its purpose to explore,  
His praise will I continually proclaim,  
And bless Him evermore.

This psalm of trust is suggestive of Rabbi Ben Ezra. How much of Ibn Ezra's philosophy has been used in Browning's poem is, however, a question, and one perhaps more curious than practical. No doubt the thought contained in Rabbi Ben Ezra is largely that which Ibn Ezra held, as it is also held and always has been held by the servants of God through all time, and so by Robert Browning, whose own unfaltering belief it unmistakably expresses. But on the whole, such teachings in these stanzas as are peculiar to Ibn Ezra would seem to be

incidental to those truths which Browning desired to emphasize and press home. It is altogether reasonable, then, that Browning should be considered as the real speaker here, and Ibn Ezra as the lay-figure. At the same time, it should not be forgotten how well qualified Ibn Ezra is to serve in this capacity. His learning and eloquence fit him for the task, as well as his Jewish faith, while he is enabled to speak with an insight which transcends creed, both because of his deeply religious nature and his wisdom accruing through years of varied experience. He falls as naturally into his place for the exposition of the scheme of things here set forth as Browning's Cleon does for a statement of Greek thought just before the time of Christ, or as John the beloved disciple does to affirm once more the truthfulness of Christianity in that wonderful poem, *A Death in the Desert*.

The reasons which lead to the view that Rabbi Ben Ezra is an expression of Browning's own thought are in the poem itself. Beneath the teachings of the Rabbi are to be seen the same unwavering confidence in the power and love of God which Browning affirms both in his other religious poetry and in the letter on the poem which has already been quoted, while the teachings themselves are wholly consistent with sentiments he elsewhere expresses. A few suggestive quotations from his writings will help to illustrate this fact and also to show that Rabbi Ben Ezra contains in brief no little of Browning's philosophy.

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Ezra** In the letter previously mentioned, in which he writes of the "genius" which inspired the poem, there is a distinct echo of the Rabbi's heart-beat:

"I, who saw power, see now Love perfect too:"

for, to his correspondent, Browning says, "It is a great thing — the greatest — that a human being should have passed the probation of life, and sum up its experience in a witness to the power and love of God. I dare congratulate you. All the help I can offer, in my poor degree, is the assurance that I see ever more reason to hold by the same hope — and that, by no means in ignorance of what has been advanced to the contrary."

In Saul we also have a similar thought:

I spoke as I saw :

I report, as a man may of God's work — all's love, yet all's law.

But Karshish, in An Epistle, eagerly questions his friend Abib and says:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too?

While in Reverie, Browning answers this question and expresses his full belief in the identity of power and love:

Then life is — to wake not sleep,  
Rise and not rest, but press  
From earth's level where blindly creep  
Things perfected, more or less,  
To the heaven's height, far and steep,  
Where, amid what strifes and storms  
May wait the adventurous quest,  
Power is Love — transports, transforms

Who aspired from worst to best,  
Sought the soul's world, spurned the worms'.

I have faith such end shall be:  
From the first, Power was — I knew.  
Life has made clear to me  
That, strive but for closer view,  
Love were as plain to see.

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These verses also emphasize the matter of man's spiritual growth, which is dwelt upon to such an extent in Rabbi Ben Ezra. The following lines from Christmas-Eve are likewise concerned with the same subject:

What is left for us, save, in growth  
Of soul, to rise up, far past both,  
From the gift looking to the giver,  
And from the cistern to the river,  
And from the finite to infinity,  
And from man's dust to God's divinity?

This attitude is also taken in *A Death in the Desert*, where we are told that

man must pass from old to new,  
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,  
From what once seemed good, to what now proves best.  
How could man have progression otherwise?

A few lines further on in this poem the thought is given that it is man only who progresses, and we read that he

Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,  
And in this striving, this converting air  
Into a solid he may grasp and use,  
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,  
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,  
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.

In *Reverie*, the question is asked:

How but from near to far  
Should knowledge proceed, increase?

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Try the clod ere test the star!  
Bring our inside strife to peace  
Ere we wage, on the outside, war!

And in The Pope we have a similar question:

Is this our ultimate stage, or starting-place  
To try man's foot, if it will creep or climb,  
'Mid obstacles in seeming, points that prove  
Advantage for who vaults from low to high  
And makes the stumbling-block a stepping-stone?

Browning thus finds the stimulus to growth,  
as in Rabbi Ben Ezra, in the very difficulties  
of life. In Saul we are shown man

By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning intensified bliss,  
And the next world's reward and repose, by the struggles  
in this.

Likewise in Mihrab Shah, pain is looked upon  
as the gift of God:

Put pain from out the world, what room were left  
For thanks to God, for love to Man? —

But pain — see God's

Wisdom at work! —

In the eye of God

Pain may have purpose and be justified.

This thought diverts into another channel in  
Abt Vogler, where the Rabbi's belief,

Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail,

is put in the question:

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence  
For the fulness of the days?

While the presentation of the matter in The  
Pope suggests the Rabbi's "welcome each  
rebuff":

Why comes temptation but for man to meet  
And master and make crouch beneath his foot,  
And so be pedestalled in triumph? Pray  
"Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"  
Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,  
Lead such temptations by the head and hair,  
Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,  
That so he may do battle and have praise!

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But though the opposing forces in life's struggle appear to overcome, the victory is ours, and not theirs. In Saul the reason is given in a single question and answer which brings to mind the comfort the Rabbi finds in his very aspirations:

What stops my despair?

This; — 'tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what  
man Would do!

Furthermore, the Rabbi's inspiring belief that every good shall endure:

All, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's  
amount:

is finely expressed in the following familiar lines from Abt Vogler:

Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name?  
Builder and maker, Thou, of houses not made with hands!  
What, have fear of change from Thee who art ever the  
same?

Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power  
expands?

There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as  
before;

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The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound ;  
What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much good  
more ;

On the earth, the broken arcs ; in the heaven, a perfect  
round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist ;  
Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good, nor  
power

Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melo-  
dist

When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,  
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,  
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;

Enough that he heard it once : we shall hear it by-and-by.

The good Ibn Ezra would very likely have given his approval to these sentiments had he been alive in Browning's day, but it is to be doubted if Browning felt obliged to go back to Ibn Ezra for them or to epitomize them in Rabbi Ben Ezra. Were it in the field of these observations to do so, additional quotations could be gathered from Browning's works to elaborate other features of this poem, with which, no doubt, the teachings of Ibn Ezra may be found to be in harmony, but which, nevertheless, are to be credited to Browning. The quotations which have been given, however, should be sufficient to indicate how truly Rabbi Ben Ezra is a statement of Browning's own thought.

The teachings of this poem are compactly stated. So much thought is often crowded into a single line that there is not one which does not yield its rich ore. Ideas are often taken up and developed anew without special regard

for symmetry or proportion. Not infrequently related ideas are brought into association, and the poem is thus given a new significance because of its appraisal of values. In this way, youth and age, body and soul, doubt and faith, pleasure and pain, attainment and aspiration, are placed side by side, each is pronounced good in its own proper place, and each is rated in terms about which there can be no mistake.

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But though the thought of Rabbi Ben Ezra is compact and though it is not always developed with strict regard for sequence, there is rounded out here a system of belief as lofty as the high hills of God and as deep as the heart of man, and the faith of the pious Rabbi, as he speaks to us in these stanzas, is constant that while the journey of life may often be toilsome, the love of God which finds response in heart and action will surely guide us all the way and yield the fullest revelation at the end. Such is the lesson of courage and cheer the Rabbi has for all who will heed, and such is the "Philosophy of Life" he teaches.



RABBI BEN EZRA. BY ROBERT  
BROWNING



RABBI BEN EZRA

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

**G**ROW old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was  
made:

Our times are in His hand  
Who saith "A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor  
be afraid!"

ii

Not that, amassing flowers,  
Youth sighed "Which rose make ours,  
Which lily leave and then as best recall?"  
Not that, admiring stars, 10  
It yearned "Nor Jove, nor Mars;  
Mine be some figured flame which blends,  
transcends them all!"

iii

Not for such hopes and fears  
Annulling youth's brief years,  
Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!  
Rather I prize the doubt  
Low kinds exist without,  
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a  
spark.

Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed 20  
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast:  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men;  
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the  
maw-crammed beast?

Rejoice we are allied  
To That which doth provide  
And not partake, effect and not receive!  
A spark disturbs our clod;  
Nearer we hold of God  
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must  
believe. 30

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!  
Be our joys three-parts pain!  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;  
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never  
grudge the throe!

For thence, — a paradox  
 Which comforts while it mocks, —  
 Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:  
 What I aspired to be, 40  
 And was not, comforts me:  
 A brute I might have been, but would not sink  
 i' the scale.

## viii

What is he but a brute  
 Whose flesh has soul to suit,  
 Whose spirit works lest arms and legs want  
 play?  
 To man, propose this test —  
 Thy body at its best,  
 How far can that project thy soul on its lone  
 way?

## ix

Yet gifts should prove their use:  
 I own the Past profuse 50  
 Of power each side, perfection every turn:  
 Eyes, ears took in their dole,  
 Brains treasured up the whole;  
 Should not the heart beat once "How good to  
 live and learn"?

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

v

Not once beat "Praise be Thine!  
I see the whole design,  
I, who saw power, see now Love perfect too:  
Perfect I call Thy plan:  
Thanks that I was a man!  
Maker, remake, complete, — I trust what Thou  
shalt do!"

60

vi

For pleasant is this flesh;  
Our soul, in its rose-mesh  
Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest:  
Would we some prize might hold  
To match those manifold  
Possessions of the brute, — gain most, as we  
did best!

vii

Let us not always say  
"Spite of this flesh to-day  
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the  
whole!"  
As the bird wings and sings, 70  
Let us cry "All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than  
flesh helps soul!"

viii

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

Therefore I summon age  
To grant youth's heritage,  
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:  
Thence shall I pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute; a God though in  
the germ.

xiv

And I shall thereupon  
Take rest, ere I be gone 80  
Once more on my adventure brave and new:  
Fearless and unperplexed,  
When I wage battle next,  
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

xx

Youth ended, I shall try  
My gain or loss thereby;  
Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:  
And I shall weigh the same,  
Give life its praise or blame:  
Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being  
old. 90

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

xvi

For note, when evening shuts,  
A certain moment cuts  
The deed off, calls the glory from the grey:  
A whisper from the west  
Shoots — “Add this to the rest,  
Take it and try its worth: here dies another  
day.”

xvii

So, still within this life,  
Though lifted o'er its strife,  
Let me discern, compare, pronounce at last,  
“This rage was right i' the main,           100  
That acquiescence vain:  
The Future I may face now I have proved the  
Past.”

xviii

For more is not reserved  
To man, with soul just nerved  
To act to-morrow what he learns to-day:  
Here, work enough to watch  
The Master work, and catch  
Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's  
true play.

As it was better, youth  
Should strive, through acts uncouth, 110  
Toward making, than repose on aught found  
made:

So, better, age, exempt  
From strife, should know, than tempt  
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death nor  
be afraid!



Enough now, if the Right  
And Good and Infinite  
Be named here, as thou callest thy hand thine  
own,  
With knowledge absolute,  
Subject to no dispute  
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee  
feel alone. 120



Be there, for once and all,  
Severed great minds from small,  
Announced to each his station in the Past!  
Was I, the world arraigned,  
Were they, my soul disdained,  
Right? Let age speak the truth and give us  
peace at last!

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

xxii

Now, who shall arbitrate?  
Ten men love what I hate,  
Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;  
Ten, who in ears and eyes 130  
Match me: we all surmise,  
They, this thing, and I, that: whom shall my  
soul believe?

xxiii

Not on the vulgar mass  
Called "work," must sentence pass,  
Things done, that took the eye and had the  
price;  
O'er which, from level stand,  
The low world laid its hand,  
Found straightway to its mind, could value in  
a trice:

xxiv

But all, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb, 140  
So passed in making up the main account;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the  
man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed  
 Into a narrow act,  
 Fancies that broke through language and es-  
 caped;  
 All I could never be,  
 All, men ignored in me,  
 This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the  
 pitcher shaped. 150

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,  
 That metaphor! and feel  
 Why time spins fast, why passive lies our  
 clay,—  
 Thou, to whom fools propound,  
 When the wine makes its round,  
 "Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone,  
 seize to-day!"

Fool! All that is, at all,  
 Lasts ever, past recall;  
 Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand  
 sure:  
 What entered into thee, 160  
 That was, is, and shall be:  
 Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and  
 clay endure.

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

xxviii

He fixed thee mid this dance  
Of plastic circumstance,  
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:  
Machinery just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

xxix

What though the earlier grooves  
Which ran the laughing loves 170  
Around thy base, no longer pause and press?  
What though, about thy rim,  
Scull-things in order grim  
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

xxx

Look not thou down but up!  
To uses of a cup,  
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,  
The new wine's foaming flow,  
The Master's lips a-glow!  
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what needst  
thou with earth's wheel? 180

xxvi

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

But I need, now as then,  
Thee, God, who moulded men;  
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,  
Did I — to the wheel of life  
With shapes and colours rife,  
Bound dizzily — mistake my end, to slake Thy  
thirst:

xxvii

So, take and use Thy work:  
Amend what flaws may lurk,  
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past  
the aim!  
My times be in Thy hand! 190  
Perfect the cup as planned!  
Let age approve of youth, and death complete  
the same!



## APPENDIX



## APPENDIX

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

**T**HE illustrative passages which follow have been chosen because of their value in interpreting the thought of Rabbi Ben Ezra, for they deal with the same matters and largely in the same spirit. Wherever they differ, the contrast has served to emphasize the teachings of the Rabbi. Especially is this true of the selections from the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám. Little comment is given, and the extracts are allowed to stand for the power they possess of explaining the philosophy of Browning's poem.

### LINES 1 to 3

Let one more attest,  
I have lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all  
was for best! — Saul.

By the spirit, when age shall o'ercome thee, thou still shalt  
enjoy  
More indeed, than at first when unconscious, the life of a  
boy. — *Ibid.*

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,  
As the swift seasons roll!  
Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!  
— Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Chambered Nautilus.*

In contrast to this and to the cheerful serenity of Rabbi Ben Ezra is Matthew Arnold's sad answer to his own question, "What is it to grow old?"

It is to spend long days,  
And not once feel that we were ever young;  
It is to add, immured  
In the hot prison of the present, month  
To month with weary pain.

It is to suffer this,  
And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel.  
Deep in our hidden heart

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

Festers the dull remembrance of a change,  
But no emotion — none.

It is — last stage of all —  
When we are frozen up within, and quite  
The phantom of ourselves,  
To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost,  
Which blamed the living man.

— Matthew Arnold, *Growing Old*.

LINES 1 to 6

Look at the generations of old, and see; did ever any trust  
in the Lord and was confounded? or did any abide in His fear,  
and was forsaken? or whom did He ever despise, that called  
upon Him? — Ecclesiasticus ii. 10. Quoted by Alice Lucas  
in connection with the poem *Resignation* by Ibn Ezra.

LINE 2. The best is yet to be.

Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into  
the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for  
them that love him. — I Corinthians ii. 9.

LINE 4. Our times are in His hand. Compare line 190.  
Also the following:

My times are in thy hand. — Psalm xxxi. 15.

My times are in Thy hand,  
Thou knowest what is best,  
And where I fear to stand,  
Thy strength brings succour bless'd.

— Ibn Ezra, *Hymn of Praise*. Translated and composed by  
Alice Lucas.

Blessed is he whose hand maintains  
The soul of all who live.

— Ibn Ezra, *The Living God*. Translated and composed by  
Alice Lucas.

LINES 4 to 6

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for  
I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee;  
yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteous-  
ness. — Isaiah xli. 10.

LINE 5. A whole I planned. Compare line 56.

LINE 6. See all, nor be afraid! Compare line 114. Also:

Thou wilt save me, Thou wilt guard me,  
Mine exalted King.  
Have regard to my entreaty  
And good tidings bring.  
Unto us Thy needy people  
Let Thine answer ring:  
Fear thou not, for I behold thee,  
I will strengthen and enfold thee,  
Yea, my right hand shall uphold thee!  
I am thy salvation!

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Ben  
Ezra

— Ibn Ezra, Prayer for Help. Translated and composed by  
Alice Lucas.

Let not your heart be troubled. — John xiv. 1.

Fear not, little flock. — Luke xii. 32.

Compare also Isaiah xli. 10, quoted above.

LINES 7 to 15

O Life! how pleasant, in thy morning,  
Young Fancy's rays the hills adorning!  
Cold-pausing Caution's lesson scorning,  
We frisk away,  
Like school-boys at th' expected warning,  
To joy an' play.

— Burns, Epistle to James Smith.

LINE 16. Rather I prize the doubt.

— let doubt occasion still more faith!

— Bishop Blougram's Apology.

You call for faith:  
I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.  
The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,  
If faith o'ercomes doubt. — Ibid.

— to be once in doubt  
Is once to be resolv'd.

— Shakespeare, Othello, Act III, Scene 3, line 179.

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

— modest doubt is call'd

The beacon of the wise, the tent that searches  
To the bottom of the worst.

— Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, Act II, Scene 2, line 15.

LINES 17 and 18

Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and  
maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven? — Job xxxv. 11.

LINES 19 to 21

The life is more than meat, and the body is more than rai-  
ment. — Luke xii. 23.

LINES 31 to 36

Count each affliction, whether light or grave,  
God's messenger sent down to thee; do thou  
With courtesy receive him; rise and bow;  
And, ere his shadow pass thy threshold, crave  
Permission first his heavenly feet to lave;  
Then lay before him all thou hast. Allow  
No cloud of passion to usurp thy brow,  
Or mar thy hospitality; no wave  
Of mortal tumult to obliterate  
The soul's marmoreal calmness. Grief should be  
Like joy, majestic, equable, sedate,  
Confirming, cleansing, raising, making free;  
Strong to consume small troubles; to commend  
Great thoughts, grave thoughts, thoughts lasting to the  
end.

— Aubrey Thomas de Vere, Sorrow.

LINES 40 and 41, and 133 to 150

Of all the myriad moods of mind  
That through the soul come thronging,  
Which one was e'er so dear, so kind,  
So beautiful as Longing?  
The thing we long for, that we are  
For one transcendent moment,  
Before the Present poor and bare  
Can make its sneering comment.  
Still, through our paltry stir and strife,  
Glow down the wished Ideal,

And Longing moulds in clay what Life  
Carves in the marble Real ;  
To let the new life in, we know,  
Desire must ope the portal ;  
Perhaps the longing to be so  
Helps make the soul immortal.

Longing is God's fresh heavenward will  
With our poor earthward striving ;  
We quench it that we may be still  
Content with merely living ;  
But, would we learn that heart's full scope  
Which we are hourly wronging,  
Our lives must climb from hope to hope  
And realize our longing.

Ah ! let us hope that to our praise  
Good God not only reckons  
The moments when we tread His ways,  
But when the spirit beckons, —  
That some slight good is also wrought  
Beyond self-satisfaction,  
When we are simply good in thought,  
Howe'er we fail in action.  
— James Russell Lowell, Longing.

LINES 43 to 45

While were it so with the soul, — this gift of truth  
Once grasped, were this our soul's gain safe, and sure  
To prosper as the body's gain is wont, —  
Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth  
Crumble.

— A Death in the Desert.

LINES 46 to 48

In our flesh grows the branch of this life, in our soul it  
bears fruit. — Saul.

LINE 54. How good to live and learn?

How good is man's life, the mere living ! how fit to employ  
All the heart and the soul and the senses forever in joy !  
— Saul.

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

LINES 76 to 78

Arise and fly  
The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;  
Move upward, working out the beast,  
And let the ape and tiger die.

— Tennyson, In Memoriam.

LINE 84. What weapons to select, what armour to indue.  
Compare Ephesians vi. 13 to 17.

LINES 109 to 114

Contrast the following :

Waste not your Hour, nor in the vain pursuit  
Of This and That endeavour and dispute ;  
Better be jocund with the fruitful Grape  
Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.

— Omar Khayyám, Edward Fitzgerald's Translation.

LINES 115 to 120

Contrast the following :

Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument  
About it and about : but evermore  
Came out by the same door where in I went.

— Omar Khayyám, Edward Fitzgerald's Translation.

LINES 127 to 132

The gods laugh in their sleeve  
To watch man doubt and fear,  
Who knows not what to believe  
Since he sees nothing clear,  
And dares stamp nothing false where he finds nothing sure.  
— Matthew Arnold, Empedocles on Etna.

Browning's escape from the dilemma is as follows :

From thine apprehended scheme of things, deduce  
Praise or blame of its contriver, shown a niggard or pro-  
fuse  
In each good or evil issue ! nor miscalculate alike  
Counting one the other in the final balance, which to  
strike,

Soul was born and life allotted : ay, the show of things unfurled  
For thy summing up and judgment, — thine no other mortal's world!

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

— La Saisiaz.

Ask thine lone soul what laws are plain to thee, —  
Thee and no other, — stand or fall by them!  
That is the part for thee : regard all else  
For what it may be — Time's illusion. This  
Be sure of — ignorance that sins, is safe.  
No punishment like knowledge!

— Ferishtah's Fancies : A Camel Driver.

LINES 145 to 150

The inward work and worth  
Of any mind, what other mind may judge  
Save God who only knows the thing He made,  
The veritable service He exacts?  
It is the outward product men appraise.

— The Pope.

LINES 151 and 152

But now, O Lord, thou art our father ; we are the clay,  
and thou our potter ; and we all are the work of thy hand.  
— Isaiah lxiv. 8.

Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will  
cause thee to hear my words.

Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he  
wrought a work on the wheels.

And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the  
hand of the potter : so he made it again another vessel, as  
seemed good to the potter to make it.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,  
O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter?  
saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so  
are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. — Jeremiah xviii.  
2 to 6.

Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?  
Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast  
thou made me thus?

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump  
to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?  
— Romans ix. 20, 21.

Eternal Potter, whose blest hands did lay  
My coarse foundation from a sod of clay,  
Thou know'st my slender vessel's apt to leak;  
Thou know'st my brittle temper's prone to break:  
Are my bones brazil, or my flesh of oak?  
O, mend what thou hast made, what I have broke:  
Look, look, with gentle eyes, and in thy day  
Of vengeance, Lord, remember I am clay.  
— Quarles's Emblems,<sup>1</sup> Book Third, Emblem V.

Omar's description of the scene in the Potter's house is given  
by Fitzgerald as follows:

As under cover of departing Day  
Slunk hunger-stricken Ramazán away,  
Once more within the Potter's house alone  
I stood, surrounded by the Shapes of Clay.  
Shapes of all Sorts and Sizes, great and small,  
That stood along the floor and by the wall;  
And some loquacious Vessels were; and some  
Listen'd perhaps, but never talk'd at all.

Said one among them — "Surely not in vain  
"My substance of the common Earth was ta'en  
"And to this Figure moulded, to be broke,  
"Or trampled back to shapeless Earth again."

Then said a Second — "Ne'er a peevish Boy  
"Would break the Bowl from which he drank in joy;  
"And He that with his hand the Vessel made  
"Will surely not in after Wrath destroy."

After a momentary silence spake  
Some Vessel of a more ungainly Make;

<sup>1</sup> One of the books he [Browning] best and earliest loved  
was Quarles' Emblems, which his father possessed in a  
seventeenth century edition, and which contains one or two  
very tentative specimens of his early handwriting. — Quoted  
from Mrs. Sutherland Orr's *Life and Letters of Robert  
Browning*.

“They sneer at me for leaning all awry :  
“What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?”

Whereat some one of the loquacious Lot –  
I think a Súfi pipkin – waxing hot –

“All this of Pot and Potter – Tell me then,  
“Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?”

“Why,” said another, “Some there are who tell  
“Of one who threatens he will toss to Hell  
“The luckless Pots he marr’d in making – Pish!  
“He’s a Good Fellow, and ’t will all be well.”

“Well,” murmur’d one, “Let whoso make or buy,  
“My Clay with long Oblivion is gone dry :  
“But fill me with the old familiar Juice,  
“Methinks I might recover by and by.”

So while the Vessels one by one were speaking,  
The little Moon look’d in that all were seeking :  
And then they jogg’d each other, “Brother! Brother!  
“Now for the Porter’s shoulder-knot a-creaking!”<sup>1</sup>

LINES 154 to 159

Contrast the following :

Strain your wine and prove your wisdom ; life is short ;  
should hope be more ?

In the moment of our talking, envious time has ebb’d away.  
Seize the present ; trust to-morrow e’en as little as you may.  
– Horace, Odes, Book I, Ode xi. Translated by John Con-  
ington.

LINES 157 and 158

What is excellent,  
As God lives, is permanent ;

<sup>1</sup> At the close of the Fasting Month, Ramazán (which makes the Musulman unhealthy and unamiable), the first Glimpse of the New Moon (who rules their division of the Year), is looked for with the utmost Anxiety, and hailed with Acclamation. Then it is that the Porter’s Knot may be heard – toward the Cellar. – Quoted from Fitzgerald’s notes to the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám.

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

Hearts are dust, hearts' loves remain ;  
Heart's love will meet thee again.  
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, Threnody.

LINES 160 and 161

A doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and one held by  
Ibn Ezra. Compare the following :

Doubt you if, in some such moment,  
As she fixed me, she felt clearly,  
Ages past the soul existed,  
Here an age 't is resting merely,  
And hence fleets again for ages,  
While the true end, sole and single,  
It stops here for is, this love-way,  
With some other soul to mingle?

— Cristina.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting :  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar :  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home.  
— Wordsworth, Ode. Intimations of Immortality.

LINE 178. The new wine's foaming flow.

But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit  
of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in  
my Father's kingdom. — Matthew xxvi. 29.

LINE 186. My end, to slake Thy thirst.

God who registers the cup  
Of mere cold water, for his sake  
To a disciple rendered up,  
Disdains not his own thirst to slake  
At the poorest love was ever offered.

— Christmas-Eve.

LINE 192. And death complete the same.

Knowledge by suffering entereth,  
And Life is perfected by Death.

— Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *A Vision of Poets*.

Rabbi  
Ben  
Ezra

— for still we hope  
That in a world of larger scope,  
What here is faithfully begun  
Will be completed, not undone.

— A. H. Clough, 'Through a Glass Darkly.'







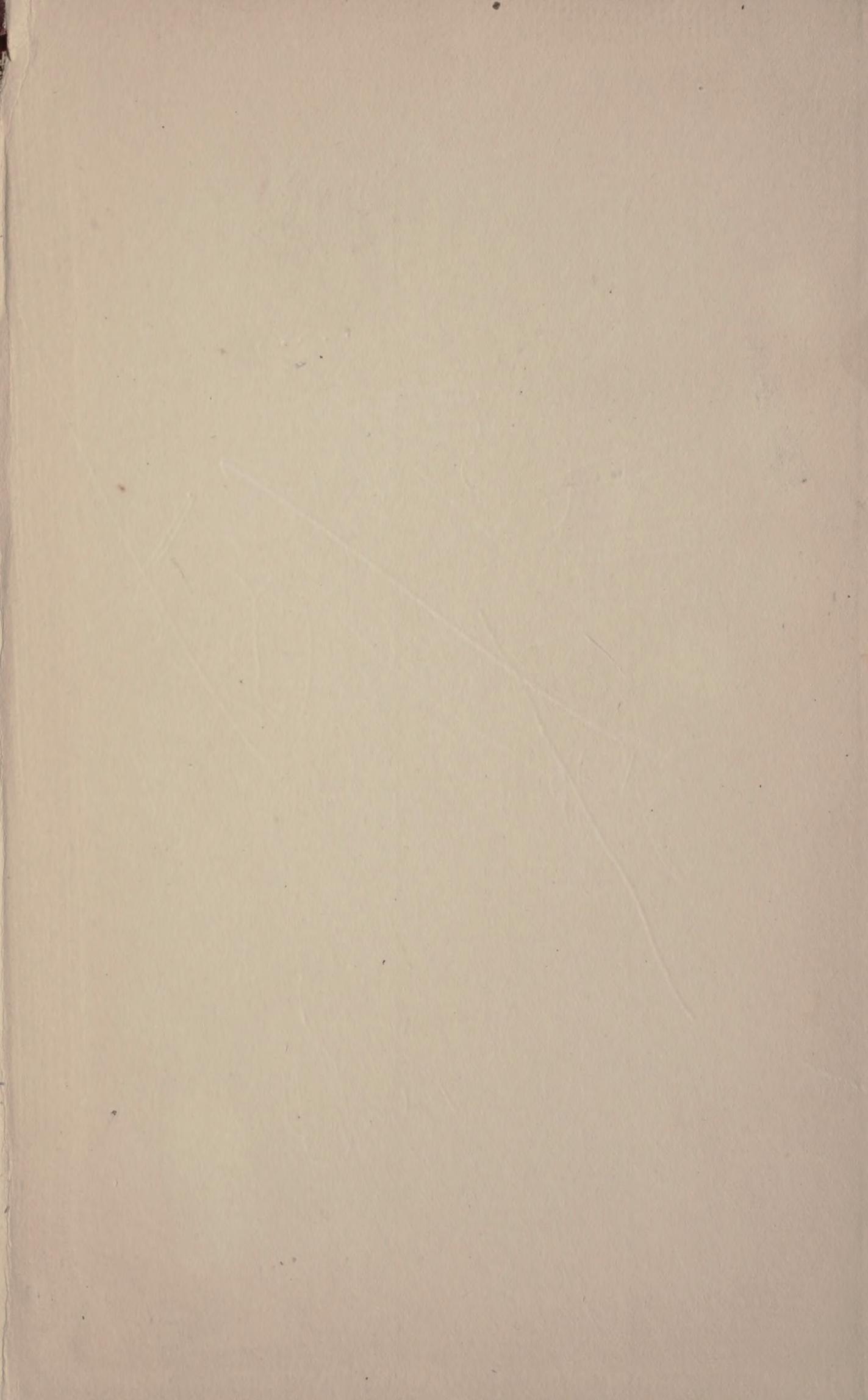


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